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ABSTRACT

This Digest discusses teaching interdisciplinary thematic units in language arts, noting that such units typically integrate broad areas of knowledge, such as social studies, mathematics, or ecology with the teaching of the four major language skills: reading, writing, listening, and speaking. The Digest presents a definition and rationale for interdisciplinary thematic units; offers examples of how teachers use theme units; and discusses research conclusions on the effectiveness of such units. It concludes that more research is needed to tell teachers how to use interdisciplinary thematic units in the language arts most effectively. (RS)

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Teaching Interdisciplinary Thematic Units in Language Arts

by Naomi Ritter

Teaching language arts through thematic units across the curriculum typically integrates broad areas of knowledge, such as social studies, mathematics, or ecology with the teaching of the four major language skills: reading, writing, listening, and speaking.

Definition and Rationale

Lipson et al. (1993) trace the idea of curriculum integration to reforms of the 1930s --specifically to John Dewey's 1933 discussion of meaningful learning. In the language arts the term "integration" usually refers not to content areas, but rather to recognizing the natural interrelationship of the four language skills. Accordingly, we may understand integration as two adjacent, linked teaching areas: first, the interrelated language arts themselves, then the further inclusion of other content areas within the already integrated language curriculum. The trend to combine these two approaches represents an interdisciplinary curriculum -- what Schubert (1993) calls "a true window on the world."

Lipson et al. analyze the underlying rationale for thematic teaching as:

* providing valuable focus;
* helping students understand why they are doing what they are doing;
* demonstrating coherent connections among disciplines that allow a transfer of learning from one context to another;
* helping students to grasp the relation of content to process;
* facilitating the acquisition of an integrated knowledge base.

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Examples of How Teachers Use Theme Units

Moore (1992) uses a talk-show format to teach science concepts. Her students appear on the show as the concepts they are studying. For instance, a host interviews hot and cold gas molecules, asking these properties how they affect wind, rain, and other weather phenomena. Miller (1989) uses plays and science fiction to teach environmental issues in grades three to six. Her classroom play uses three time periods when aliens from a distant galaxy visit an earth site. Their wisdom and vision of the future show children how to avoid a grim fate for our planet. Her lessons include 18-32 speaking parts, suggestions for props and costumes, and cues for sound, music, and lighting effects.

Shotick and Walsko (1997) use children's theater to teach economics. In their audience participation play "Barnyard Economics" a pig's adventures illustrate opportunity costs, the production of goods and services, and productive resources.

A cross-curricular series of books by McAllister et al. (1998) exemplifies language arts in the primary grades as an introduction to both science and social studies. These units focus on the environment, the natural world, animals, and the lives of people around us. This series of six books features ready-to-use activities, sample reading texts, group demonstrations, and many classroom-tested teaching suggestions.

Mathematics combines well with drama, claims Nave (1983). His play "Even Nothing is Something" conveys mathematical concepts through staged dialogue. Nave notes that "students who struggle with daily work sparkle in the plays." Reed (1995) conducts surveys in middle school to make connections among math concepts and such diverse subjects as sports, fiction, biography, and business. She notes that creating these links not only makes math more compelling and understandable to students; but doing so also relates it meaningfully to their daily lives.

Research Conclusions

While few researchers have controlled results of teaching specific interdisciplinary thematic units through language arts, some researchers have explored the general approach of such a curriculum. A study by Yorks and Follo (1993) suggests that students learn better from thematic, interdisciplinary instruction than from a traditional, single-subject curriculum.

The authors drew this conclusion from testing the engagement rates of 25 students learning social studies, reading, and math in a mixed-age classroom of 3rd and 4th graders. Using an engagement rate observation form, students' self-perceptions, and teacher's assessments, the authors showed higher engagement rates during thematic instruction than during single-subject lessons.

A similarly positive result emerged from a study by Schubert and Melnick (1997). They investigated the effects on students of integrating the visual, performing, and musical arts within their civics, English, history, and geography classes. Their qualitative multiple-site study evaluated the integrated learning of students in 11 rural, suburban, and urban elementary, middle, and high schools. Their data showed that students made vivid connections among the various subject areas. They also found that incorporating curricular content in various intelligence areas offered new learning opportunities for students with difficulties in verbal or mathematical areas. The authors also concluded that this integrated curriculum increased students' positive attitudes toward school and their self-concepts.

Lawton (1994) surveyed core curricula in middle schools from the 1950s to the present. In his recent study of 15,000 Maine eighth-graders, students in interdisciplinary courses outscored their peers in single-discipline subjects by 58 points. "Clearly," he concludes, "the integrated approach is effective."

However, Lipson et al. question many of the assumptions made by educators who favor themed teaching. They conclude that language arts professionals must confront several planning and judging issues before they can realize "the richly meaningful instruction envisioned by most proponents." The ambitious goal of such a curriculum requires using "the scope and sequence of one discipline as a skeleton on which to attach skills and concepts from other disciplines." Accordingly, choosing the most worthwhile themes is critical. And doing so means evaluating how well these topics will unify concepts across disciplines.

This research study found scarce information for teachers seeking depth and detail about the kinds of judgments required to plan curriculum wisely. However, rather than condemning the whole thematic effort, the authors call the interdisciplinary thematic approach "not a panacea, but an opportunity." More research is needed to tell teachers how to use this opportunity most effectively.

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